

Hong Kong Rain

John Lake tripped on a curb and crashed into a dim sum stand. The massive cast-iron vessel overturned. Dumplings and oil and boiling water scattered and hissed across filthy cobblestones. John's hands ripped into the pavers. His dark suit tore at the knees. The target ducked into a mist shrouded alley a few yards ahead, never slowing, never glancing back. John leapt to his feet and powered around the turn, heedless of outraged onlookers as he barreled after his quarry. The alley led to a building, itself a warren, one of hundreds, as densely packed as the street outside, every nook and cranny a riot of color, activity, hustle.

Hong Kong.

The target was a slip of fabric vanishing into a concrete stairwell. John pursued, knocking past displays, a pyramid of pots and pans clattering in his wake. He pounded up the concrete steps, two at a time, spinning at each landing, catching sight of the target every other floor.

How tall was this place?

Eight stories, as it turned out. John's legs were burning when he hit the ladder to the roof. The hatch stood open, yawning into darkness. John emerged onto rough macadam studded with rusted, dysfunctional equipment and a low rail over a lambent maze of streets.

He spotted the target as the mist returned to rain. The man's chest heaved, his bespoke shirt and paisley cummerbund stained with rain and sweat. He stood poised at the rail, panicked eyes darting between John and whatever lay beyond the edge.

With effort, John straightened himself and approached the man. His mission. His victim. His kill. It should have happened earlier that evening, without all the drama, without the indignity of running in the crowds and rain. But every mission had friction, the random chaos of half-planned operations conducted on tight timelines with inadequate research and preparation.

Or maybe it was John's fault.

Whatever.

The man hadn't died in the posh restroom of the Peninsula, to be discovered in ignominy on the porcelain throne by some other gala attendee. He had bolted, screaming, with John in open pursuit. There was nothing subtle about it. Nothing at all covert. It was obvious who was chasing whom, and everyone in the ballroom had seen. It would be a long time before John Lake could return to Hong Kong.

But success was success.

The man in front of John was Lee Jeong Shin, a native of Hong Kong who'd worked with the resistance, worked with the CIA, and wormed his way into the entire Western network in the beleaguered city. He'd betrayed them all. Not for patriotism, nor to save his family from the Communists, nor any other high-minded purpose.

Just money.

He would discover that the price of betrayal was a lot higher than money.

John's hand snapped up, aiming for the man's trachea. A quick pop to the larynx and Shin would drop eight stories to whatever the hell lay in the darkness below.

John's hand sliced through air. It took a moment for his brain to compute what his eyes beheld. The man had vanished over the edge.

Fine with John.

He leaned over the edge to confirm the man's broken body on the pavement.

There was no pavement. A narrow canal, turbid and black and swollen from the relentless monsoon. A soiled white shirt caught just enough light for John to track the figure of Lee Jeong Shin working his way with the current. John's eyes traced the line of the canal and found the lights of Victoria Harbor.

John took a deep breath. He sloughed off his jacket and kicked off his shoes. He stood on the lip. He mouthed a curse.

And jumped.

The water hit him like a wall of ice. He couldn't breathe, his chest seized up, his mouth working involuntarily. Brackish bile, smeared with oil and refuse and the effluence of poverty and overcrowding putrid on his tongue. He surfaced, gasped, and spat. Some of the water went down his throat, and he gagged. He felt the pull of the current, an undertow that wanted to drag him out to the harbor from the bottom, not the surface.

Adrenaline and desperation brought his muscles back online, and he paddled, then stroked, forcing his body into a breaststroke that kept him glued to the surface. First priority, don't sink. Second, get out of the water. A distant third, find and kill Lee Jeong Shin.

Despite the frigid water, John's muscles warmed as he swam. By the time he reached the harbor, the blessed harbor, where the water wasn't trying to drag him under, his breaststroke was strong and he had almost found a rhythm. With each lift of his head, he looked for signs of the target, adjusting his course as patches of white fabric caught the moonlight or a reflection of bright cityscape. Shin was still in the water. So John stayed in the water, too.

John envisioned a waterborne grapple, holding the man under the harbor chop, waiting for the bucking and clawing to fade into twitching, seizing, and stillness. Not an ideal way to kill. Not the original plan. Not a good plan at all. But effective enough.

John punched his head above the surface and inhaled, scanning as he did. He saw a form up ahead, a junk, lines and spars sagging. A white smudge on the hull, moving upwards. Shin, climbing aboard. John adjusted his course and surged.

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John's bare feet hit the rough wooden planks of the deck without a sound. He forced his breathing to slow despite the burning in his lungs. A narrow walkway surrounded a square central structure, a bare mast emerging from its center, the lines and spars of a traditional lateen rig hanging loosely in the rain. Dim outlines fore and aft suggested additional rigging. John crept along the deck, looking for a way into the cabin.

He found it at the midpoint, directly under the mast, low and narrow. And locked. With his bare heel, John kicked the door. It didn't budge. Two more tries made a lot of noise and sent

stabs of pain up his leg, but got nowhere. John retreated along the deck to get a running start. He winced at the thought of the next impact and took a deep breath.

Before he could move, the door exploded.

Specifically, a hole blew out of the door. The sound of a shotgun blast accompanied splintering wood. In the wake of the concussion, John heard high-pitched, panicked voices. He approached the door, listening. A door slammed somewhere inside. Then came silence.

He head-checked the hole. Nothing but darkness. Gingerly, he reached a hand through the gap and found the slide, the infernal slide, that secured the door. He pulled, and it opened.

The smells of saltwater and rotten wood and mold greeted him. He slipped sideways from the door to avoid profiling himself against the city lights and flung himself into a corner.

He was unarmed, of course. Had been the whole time. There was never any question of getting a firearm into the fundraiser at the Peninsula, and he didn't need a gun to kill. Now, though, he didn't like the math. John, unarmed and unfamiliar with the boat. His opposition, armed, potentially with help, and possibly familiar with the vessel.

Gradually, his eyes adjusted to the gloom. A low table. A wok, an oven, a propane cooktop. A rectangular object that John recognized as a traditional icebox. The kind that relied on actual blocks of ice.

The boat was a home.

Lee Jeong Shin's home?

He listened, waiting in the darkness. The rain had ceased. Wooden timbers creaked. Hemp lines slapped wooden spars.

He crept to the head of a low stair. It led downward, toward the bow. A door lay at the end of a short corridor. A master cabin, most likely. He pressed himself to the wall as he approached, wary of the shotgun.

He reached the door and tried the handle. It turned but refused to open. There was a booming roar, and a hole the size of his fist exploded from the door. Lead shot carved thin, blazing hot grooves across his stomach. John realized he was screaming. His hands clutched his torso, felt the searing wounds. Blood seeped but didn't gush from half a dozen shallow grooves across his abdomen. The pain was awesome, but the wound wasn't fatal. Not even serious.

Sounds emerged from inside the stateroom. The slap of a hatch, a scrambling of feet. John heaved a ragged breath and smashed the door. Above a dimly lit pile of sheets and pillows, a figure disappeared through an overhead hatch.

John lurched onto the berth. His bare foot hit something solid, and he glanced down. A double-barreled shotgun. Two barrels, two shells. Useless, now. He hauled himself through the hatch.

Shin slumped at the base of the forward mast. There was nowhere left to run. The bow pulpit angled only over empty, open water. His eyes were resigned, his face slack. The thick humidity over the harbor congealed into rain again. It drummed the wooden deck and hissed across the chop in the harbor, masking Shin's heaving, gasping breath and washing clean his tears.

John Lake strode forward and clasped Shin's head in his hands. He stared into those tragic, exhausted eyes and began the wrenching motion that would twist Shin's head up and sideways, breaking the man's neck.

A child's cry pierced the gloom. It came from close behind. John whipped his head and saw two pairs of eyes peeping from the hatch. The eyes were large, the faces small. A boy and a girl. Little, maybe seven or eight. Maybe less.

Shin cried out in Mandarin, then in English. "Inside. Hide."

Shit.

John looked back at Shin, his hands still gripping the man's head, then back at the children. They stared, their innocent eyes reflecting the lights of the harbor.

Shin spoke again, a shudder in his voice. "Go inside, xiao bao bei."

John didn't speak Chinese, but he'd spent enough time in the region to recognize the term of endearment used by parents for their children.

Shit. Shit, shit, shit.

John Lake found himself suddenly and unexpectedly frozen. He felt the pain of a child witnessing murder. Felt it like it was happening to him. Again. The change in him. The stunted emotions, the impulse to violence, the snapping of some fundamental cord that bound him to the human race.

With a curse, John released Shin and spun over the bow pulpit. As he twisted in midair, he glimpsed Lee Jeong Shin falling to his hands and knees, gasping, eyes wide in shock and relief.

Then John Lake vanished into the dark, frigid water.